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## The liberalised country: Relaxed laws led to fall in deaths

By Dale Fuchs

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When Portugal decriminalised drugs for personal use in 2001, many people worried that the sunny Southern European country would become a haven for drug tourists, replacing Amsterdam as the preferred destination for a holiday high. Some politicians in this conservative, Catholic country envisioned a hard drug supermarket, like Lisbon's infamous Canal Ventoso district, extending to the popular beach resorts in the Algarve. Others feared a surge in snorting and pill-popping among Portuguese youth.

"There will be plane-loads of students heading for Portugal to smoke marijuana and worse, knowing we won't put them in jail," warned the conservative opposition leader at the time, Paulo Portas.

But Portugal's socialist-led parliament voted to decriminalise the personal use of everything from cannabis to heroin, anyway. Until 2001, the small country had the highest rate of HIV infection from syringe sharing in the EU. By some estimates, as many as 100,000 heroin addicts roamed the streets in 2000, sometimes committing petty crimes for cash.

Portugal is the only member of the European Union with legislation explicitly stating that personal drug use is not a crime. But other countries, such as Spain, do not prosecute consumption or possession of small amounts of marijuana.

One result of Portugal's drug policies is that those plane-loads of drug tourists never came. And a study in 2009 by the Cato Institute, a libertarian think-tank based in Washington DC, found decriminalisation did not spark a surge in drug use, and, in many categories, such as marijuana, rates are among the lowest in Europe.

The number of heroin-related deaths was halved and the number of people in drug treatment programmes more than doubled, according to the study. Though more teenagers smoke marijuana, youth heroin use has dwindled.

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